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By his early 30s, Goldstein had established himself as a successful, and prosperous, Supreme Court advocate, an adjunct professor at Stanford and Harvard law schools and, through his blog, a leading public commentator on the justices.

In the early 2000s, ESPN began broadcasting poker, a game Goldstein had never played. “I loved watching,” he told me. “I think of it as a pretty intellectual thing. Actually, I like it because what poker is, fundamentally, is management of luck and management of risk.”

Goldstein quickly graduated from games around the kitchen table with jars of quarters to tables of high-rollers in Washington and New York. “I would play in home games where you could win and lose \$100,000,” he told me.

Goldstein's style of play reflected his swaggering, risk-friendly approach to litigation. "Very often lawyers, or people in general, want to make every conceivable argument, and you get in the situation where, by making every point, you essentially make no points," he told me. "I'm a big believer that you have to figure out what your winning argument is. It is a poker thing, and that is being willing to say: This is not working. And if I just sit here and hedge my bets and argue both, I'm not going to accomplish anything."

The first major turning point in Goldstein's poker career came in 2008, when he put up the \$10,000 fee to enter the World Series of Poker, a multiday extravaganza in Las Vegas. On the first night, after the tournament had ended for the day, Goldstein sat down at a table at the Bellagio. "I end up playing without looking at my cards," Goldstein said. That, to put it mildly, was an unconventional strategy. He bet wildly and recklessly, but his opponents were flummoxed by his blind aggression. Goldstein told me he ultimately played that way for 18 hours and won some \$400,000.

That Goldstein had law clients in the poker world helped him explain to his wife his increasingly long absences from Washington. (He also represented the website Poker Stars, which was headquartered on the Isle of Man.)

Goldstein quickly realized that even with his successful law practice, he didn't have the cash to compete. "The idea was to be able to play very, very, very deep and not be out of money," Goldstein told me. He took out a \$10 million line of credit from Stewart Resnick, a California billionaire who owns the parent company of Pom juice, a former client of Goldstein's.

In 2014, Goldstein met a Malaysian businessman who would bring his poker career to the next level. The businessman, Paul Phua, has been called the "world's biggest bookie" because he owned one of the leading sports betting sites in Asia. He was also an inveterate gambler who traveled the world looking for high-stakes poker games. On July 9 that year, the F.B.I. raided Phua's villa at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, which went for tens of thousands of dollars a night, as part of an investigation into \$400 million in illegal wagers on the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Through connections in the poker world, Phua hired Goldstein as his defense lawyer. Goldstein learned that the F.B.I. had gained access to Phua's villa by posing as cable TV technicians. Goldstein convinced the court that the ruse made the search illegal, and the case against Phua fell apart. A great friendship between the two men was born

With Phua, Goldstein no longer flew commercial. They took Phua's jet to Hong Kong and Manila, and Goldstein increasingly operated in hushed private suites or homes. Two types of poker predominated as Goldstein moved his action into Phua's world: In "ring games," six to 10 players compete against one another; "heads-up games" are one on one, with just a dealer.

After getting the loan from Resnick, Goldstein promptly lost \$9 million playing ring games. "Playing ring poker against a bunch of people requires enormous discipline, enormous patience, and those are just not things in poker that I have,"

Goldstein said. “If you’re playing against eight people, just mathematically, the odds that somebody has a hand that’s better than yours are quite high. If you’re playing against one person, you don’t have to be nearly as patient. What’s rewarded is being very aggressive. So heads-up, in essence, is built for me.” Goldstein started taking on investors in his heads-up contests, who would share in his wins and losses.

In heads-up games, most of Goldstein’s opponents were billionaires with an expensive hobby. With just three men in the room, the games didn’t feature a lot of conversation. “You can imagine people who are just super, super focused,” he told me. “They’re not chatting. There’s me, there’s the dealer, there’s them and, you know, somewhere between two and 20 hours of pretty stone silence, except for the bets.” In Manila, Goldstein played poker with a gambler known as Tango and won \$13.4 million. He also won \$9.96 million from a gambler known as Chairman. From 2016 to 2018, Goldstein was out of the country for almost a full year.



Goldstein at the Triton Super High Roller Series in Montenegro, in 2018. The buy-in for the event was \$1 million. Danny Maxwell, via PokerNews

At the end of 2016, Goldstein played a California businessman named Alec Gores in Beverly Hills and won \$26.435 million — the biggest score of his life. (Earlier that year, Goldstein also won \$200,000 in a game that included the actor Kevin Hart.) During this run he won a total of about \$50 million, and even though he had sold roughly 75 percent of his stakes to investors, he still personally cleared about \$12 million. Flush with his success against Gores, Goldstein sat down to a heads-up match with a real estate magnate named Bob Safai — and this time he didn't spread the risk by taking on backers. "I just have convinced myself, because I won \$50 million in heads-up poker, that I am a savant at heads-up poker," Goldstein told

me. He promptly lost \$14 million to Safai, all out of his own pocket.

I asked Goldstein how he could stand the stress of playing for such gargantuan stakes. “I have both the benefit and the great disadvantage of not placing particular value on the money,” he said. “So that means that I can play at very large stakes and not get psyched out about it, but it also means that I will take too many risks with too much money. So it’s a blessing and a curse. It does not bother me. It doesn’t cause my heart rate to go up. I mean, I can think of \$26 million like \$26,000, really, genuinely.”

Around this time, at least when he was on the road, Goldstein also began to adopt the kind of decadent lifestyle he saw in the jet-set poker world.

Stewart Resnick, who had extended the \$10 million line of credit.

Goldstein hit on what seemed like a solution to his money problems: the perfect opponent. After he started playing poker for seven- and eight-figure stakes, he began seeking out a particular Southern businessman who was an especially profligate player. If Goldstein could line up heads-up games against him, perhaps he could clear his debts and start making real money. But Goldstein had a hard time setting up a game with him. (Goldstein told me about his dealings with the businessman on the condition that I not use his name.

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Finally, Goldstein found his way to the Southern businessman through a game at the Beverly Hills home of Alec Gores, which included, among others, Leonardo DiCaprio and an old-school gambler known as Big Al DeCarolus. (Al Pacino came by to watch, but he didn't play.) DeCarolus then invited Goldstein to a poker game in Costa Rica where the Southerner would be playing.

Starting
in Costa Rica, Goldstein and the businessman struck up a friendship as well as a poker rivalry, and Goldstein began flying to play against him, usually successfully. Goldstein traveled back and forth so often that he rented an apartment in the city where the man lived.

Goldstein's poker rivalry with the Southerner was one reason for his announcement, in March 2023, that he would give up his law practice.

to accomplish anymore,” he told Bloomberg Law. Goldstein

told me that the main reason he ultimately abandoned the law was because he was finally playing heads-up games against the Southern businessman. “I was beating him,” Goldstein said. “And that was just a way more interesting life.” Goldstein won roughly \$50 million from the Southerner, netting \$15 million for himself after paying off his investors.



Goldstein says: "I think of it as a pretty intellectual thing. Actually, I like it because what poker is, fundamentally, is management of luck and management of risk." Jonno Rattman for The New York Times

applications that he and
Howe filled out for mortgages. In those bank forms, Goldstein understated his
debts, especially the multiple millions of dollars that he still owed to Resnick for his
line of credit.

Goldstein told me that he omitted that information
because he wanted to keep that debt secret from Howe, as he had kept her in the
dark about most of his poker activity.

Goldstein's lifetime win-loss record has been frozen for the past year. He's won upward of \$88 million in heads-up contests, a vast majority of which went to his investors. Most of Goldstein's losses came in ring games, which he financed himself. He told me that overall he was a net loser, with a deficit of between \$10 million and \$15 million.

I asked Goldstein whether he thought he had a problem. "Definitely not," he said. "Because, for example, I haven't played in quite a while; I feel no desire to. I was very happy not gambling. I have no interest in other forms of gambling."

Jeffrey Toobin is a former assistant U.S. attorney who writes about the intersection of law and politics. He is the author of “The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court,” “The Pardon: The Politics of Presidential Mercy” and other books.